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Viewing cable 06MANAGUA1400, NICARAGUAN ELECTIONS REGIONAL REPORTING: RIO SAN

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Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
06MANAGUA1400	2006-06-27 16:35	2011-08-30 01:44	CONFIDENTIAL	Embassy Managua

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/24/2016
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [SOCI](#) [NU](#)
SUBJECT: NICARAGUAN ELECTIONS REGIONAL REPORTING: RIO SAN
JUAN

REF: MANAGUA 1359

Classified By: Ambassador Paul Trivelli for reasons 1.4 (b and d)

¶1. (SBU) Summary: The Nicaraguan department of Rio San Juan is largely rural and a majority of the population has voted Liberal in every election since 1990. The FSLN has, however, captured a consistently large minority of the vote. Local political, religious, and community leaders disagree on whether or not citizens will vote in large numbers for the new parties that have appeared in opposition to the PLC-FSLN political pact and the corruption and anti-democratic practices that the pact has perpetuated. There is a widespread consensus, however, that the national and local electoral authorities are working to support the FSLN. Contacts reported numerous irregularities during the recent electoral verification campaign. End Summary.

¶2. (U) The remote southern department of Rio San Juan (est. pop. 96,000) is divided into six municipalities: San Carlos (FSLN); Morrito (PLC); San Miguelito (PLC); El Almendro (APRE); El Castillo (PLC); and San Juan del Norte (FSLN). Farming, ranching, fishing, and limited tourism provide income to its mostly rural and impoverished residents. Economic development is limited by poor transportation links and infrastructure. Poloff and Political Specialist met with political party, NGO, and labor representatives, Catholic Church leaders, and local community activists to discuss the upcoming national elections, economic and social conditions (septel). We spent a total of two days in the departmental capital San Carlos and the Solentiname archipelago in Lake Nicaragua.

IS THE ALN THE NEW LIBERAL FORCE IN RIO SAN JUAN?

¶3. (C) We first met with the departmental chief for the Nicaraguan Liberal Alliance (ALN) and ALN departmental deputy candidate Sergio Romero. Romero joined the PLC in 1995 but defected to the ALN out of disgust with the PLC-FSLN pact and the fact that the local PLC structure would not permit any "new faces" to rise to leadership positions. He claimed that the ALN maintains a strong party structure in Rio San Juan, with directorships in each municipality and developing organizations in smaller towns and rural areas. When asked about coordination with ALN alliance members, Romero stated that he had formed a departmental committee last week to direct ALN activities, which includes representatives from the Conservative Party (PC), the Resistance (PRN), the Alliance for the Republic (APRE) and the Christian Social Party (PSC). The PRN in particular is strong in the

department, as many ex-contras were resettled there after the 1980s civil war, he noted. When queried about the allegiance of the Conservative mayor of El Almendro, Ulfredo Arguello, Romero commented that Arguello is a close personal friend of PLC vice presidential candidate Jose Antonio Alvarado, but has nevertheless indicated his support for the ALN to Romero.

14. (C) Aldrisk Bedford, the head of APRE in Rio San Juan, reported that APRE members in the department support the ALN and Eduardo Montealegre, despite the former popularity of ex-APRE presidential candidate Jose Antonio Alvarado, who defected to the PLC. Bedford commented that the PLC and FSLN are currently the strongest parties in the region, but was positive about the ALN's potential in the department, noting the presence of young and energetic leaders such as Sergio Romero, ALN National Assembly deputy Bladimir Pineda, and party activist Luis Downs. He admitted, however, that Romero "lacks political experience." When asked if the deputy candidate nominations had caused defections within the Liberal ranks, Bedford replied affirmatively, but said the flow of membership was largely from the PLC to the ALN. He thought that Ulfredo Arguello would support the ALN because he would disapprove of Alvarado's alliance with the PLC.

15. (C) Arguello later told us that he does not think Montealegre has any support in Rio San Juan and that many Liberal dissidents in the department had followed Alvarado back to the PLC. He personally does not like Montealegre, although out of some residual sense of loyalty to APRE, he invited ALN vice presidential candidate Fabricio Cajina to meet with ranchers in the department. According to Arguello, Cajina was unable to convince the ranchers that the ALN represents a viable alternative to the PLC. Arguello mentioned the ALN's recent press release reminding the public

that "PC" was officially dropped from the Alliance's name. He claimed that this was the work of Liberal ALN deputy Jamileth Bonilla, who is "driving the Conservative Party away from the ALN" and destroying the Alliance.

16. (C) In a later meeting, PLC departmental director Benjamin Gross mentioned that the ALN changed its departmental deputy alternate candidate from Liberal Rafael Martinez (who won second place in the ALN primaries) to Conservative Aldo Padilla without informing Martinez or anyone else in the local ALN leadership. Gross claimed that Martinez, a personal friend of his, was upset about the "betrayal" of his party and was considering returning to the PLC with his followers. (Note: Neither Romero nor Bedford were immediately aware of the change. End Note.)

17. (C) Most of the labor and community activists we met with were reserved regarding their political preferences, but not all. Martin Aguilar Bendana, the president of the Rio San Juan Fisherman's Union, arrived at our meeting sporting a "Eduardo Presidente 2006" shirt. He claimed that Montealegre is a "good candidate" and that the ALN has "surpassed the PLC" in the department. Aguilar believes that the FSLN also has "solid support" within the department, but the MRS leaders are "working hard" to attract Sandinista votes for Herty Lewites.

ALVARADO CANDIDACY A BENEFIT, BUT ALEMAN WILL COST PLC VOTES

18. (C) Benjamin Gustavo Gross, the PLC director for Rio San Juan for over two years, joined the PLC at its inception. During his meeting with us, Gross insisted that only the PLC and FSLN have any real support in the department. He commented that the Camino Cristiano (CCN) party had shown some strength in the 2004 municipal elections, but claimed that the CCN's followers now largely support the PLC. Gross is very enthusiastic about the PLC presidential/vice presidential formula, noting that Alvarado "did a lot for Rio San Juan" while he was director of the GON's social investment fund (FISE). Gross did admit, however, that he is "disappointed" with the selection of Carlos Oliva as the

PLC's departmental deputy candidate since he had hoped to win the position for himself, and concurred that the PLC's opaque methods of naming the deputy candidates would cost the party support, both in Rio San Juan and nationally. Furthermore, Liberals in Rio San Juan are unhappy with the PLC national leadership because the department was promised a national deputy nomination, but the party did not deliver.

¶9. (C) In a separate meeting, PLC mayor of San Miguelito Carlos Domingo Fletes asserted that Rio San Juan is a Liberal department and will support the PLC. He claimed that the FSLN is the dominant force in the larger towns, but the PLC dominates in the countryside. When asked about the effect of Arnoldo Aleman's leadership of the party and pact with the FSLN, Fletes responded that PLC supporters are backing the Rizo/Alvarado ticket, not Aleman, and Jose Rizo will take control of party once he wins the presidency. (Note: Most non-PLC contacts commented that the PLC has lost considerable support in Rio San Juan because of Aleman's pact and the party's general lack of effective leadership. One insisted that "Liberals know that Rizo is a tool of Aleman -- they will not be fooled." End Note.)

FSLN IS SECOND FORCE IN RIO SAN JUAN, DOMINATES SOLENTINAME
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¶10. (SBU) Virtually all contacts agreed that the FSLN is the second strongest force in Rio San Juan after the Liberals, especially in the larger towns. Sergio Romero noted the FSLN's considerable support in the municipalities of San Miguelito, San Carlos and Morrito. One contact confidently stated that "Daniel will get 30 percent" of the vote in Rio San Juan.

¶11. (SBU) Although not a major electoral force, the 1,000 or so residents of the Solentiname archipelago are solidly Sandinista. Community leaders speak reverently of priest, poet and FSLN activist Ernesto Cardenal, who came to the islands in 1975 and encouraged the inhabitants to create art inspired by their pristine tropical surroundings. The "primitivist" painting style created by the islanders has become famous and generates considerable income for the most talented artists. Cardenal also initiated a literacy campaign and brought formal education, transportation links, and environmental consciousness to the islands. While still poor and remote, the poverty of Solentiname is now more gentele than grinding, and the natives credit Cardenal and the Sandinistas with this transformation.

IS MRS "READY FOR THE CAMPAIGN"?
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¶12. (C) Domingo Mercado, departmental deputy candidate for the Sandinista Renovation Movement (MRS) in Rio San Juan informed us that the MRS is "ready for the campaign" with a structure and trained party poll watchers (fiscales) in every municipality. Mercado claimed that he had never been active in politics before and commented that MRS supporters include many Liberals, Conservatives and independents, though most are Sandinistas unhappy with Daniel Ortega's leadership of the FSLN. Ex-FSLN activist Freddy Vasquez noted that many Sandinistas may "cross vote" in November as Mercado is a popular candidate locally, but many voters do not recognize MRS presidential candidate Herty Lewites. To correct this lack of recognition, Lewites may open his official campaign in Rio San Juan, Mercado reported. Regarding the other parties, Mercado and Vasquez admitted that the PLC and FSLN have considerable strength. The ALN has "considerable sympathy," they said, but lacks experienced activists who can turn this sentiment into votes.

LOCAL CLERGY: CARDINAL OBANDO IS NOT THE OFFICIAL VOICE OF
THE CATHOLIC CHURCH
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¶13. (C) During a meeting with local Catholic Church

officials, parochial coordinator Frank Teran commented that there is not yet a lot of enthusiasm for the campaign, although most residents will ultimately vote for the party that they have associated with historically, which will hurt the ALN and MRS. Father Pablo Alexis disagreed, noting that many young people will vote for the "candidates of change," although ALN and MRS leaders need to work harder to inform the population about their plans for government. Father Luis Zavala predicted a number of "crossed votes" as citizens would support popular local candidates, but back traditional parties nationally.

¶14. (C) Poloff inquired about the seemingly discordant messages from Catholic Church leaders in Nicaragua regarding the elections -- formal head, Archbishop of Managua Leopoldo Brenes states that the Church should be apolitical, but retired Cardinal Miguel Obando y Bravo claims that priests and bishops should opine on the campaign. Zavala replied that the Church should promote voting and provide general information about the elections, although Church leaders can also express their personal opinions. Zavala commented that they were awaiting official instructions from the Episcopal Conference related to the electoral campaign. The Conference, not Cardinal Obando, is the official voice of the Church, he stated.

NO CONFIDENCE IN ELECTORAL AUTHORITIES

¶15. (C) All contacts expressed a considerable lack of confidence in the Supreme Electoral Council (CSE) and its local branch, the Departmental Electoral Council (CED), which is led by an FSLN activist. Aldrisk Bedford labeled the CED a "mafia" in the hands of the FSLN, and Sergio Romero claimed that CED members were telling Liberals that "they would have to pay" to participate in the recent verification process (reftel). Romero also accused the CED of providing registration forms to FSLN party members so they could allow their supporters to "verify" without having to travel to the voting centers. Carlos Fletes commented that the CED did not provide enough change of address forms in the voting centers (only 40 per table) and said that the PLC will organize trips to the CED in San Carlos for those who were unable to complete the verification process.

¶16. (C) Domingo Mercado reported that MRS fiscales detected numerous irregularities during the verification process. MRS will file a report to the CSE and NGOs involved in observation claiming that 1,133 people were allowed to register in two different voter registries (padrones). The report will also note that the CSE provided insufficient change of address forms, and no forms at all for the fiscales to register complaints. MRS fielded fiscales at 95 percent

of the voting centers in Rio San Juan -- the party did not have sufficient funds to send fiscales to Solentiname or the remote border areas. When poloff asked Mercado about the CSE's claims that many voters were returning from a temporary move to the North and South Atlantic Autonomous Regions (RAAN and RAAS) where they registered to influence the March regional elections, he responded that those voters registering a change of address had come from different departments and Costa Rica, not the RAAN and RAAS.

¶17. (C) At the CED, we were originally scheduled to meet with FSLN-affiliated CED president Nidia Vallecillo Sevilla, but she was absent at the time of the appointment. Instead, we saw PLC-affiliated First Member Sandra Parrales. Parrales claimed that the CSE opened 79 voting centers in Rio San Juan for the verification, 65 rural and 14 urban. The final results demonstrated that 43.13 percent of eligible voters participated in the verification. Parrales commented that the CSE provided "excellent" training for the verification officials, although some abandoned their posts complaining that the per diem was too low. She explained that the CED has 4,000 undistributed cédulas, but will be sending them out to the municipal electoral offices (CEMs) and IFES-sponsored kiosks for easier access. Several people who solicited a

cedula have since passed away or used their proof of solicitation to obtain a passport and then emigrated to Costa Rica, she observed.

¶18. (C) Parrales was initially reluctant to criticize the CSE to us, but ultimately admitted that the organization "isn't perfect." She agreed that the CSE failed to provide sufficient change of address forms and does not believe that the migration is fraud-related. Parrales noted that the CED's Second Member position was allocated to the CCN after the 2004 elections, but through some "strange circumstances" was passed to the Alternativa por el Cambio (AC) party, whose representative often votes with the FSLN president and against her. (Note: Benjamin Gross was more explicit in his accusations against the CSE, claiming that FSLN magistrate Emmet Lang personally selected the AC representative to sit on the CED, who is really a loyal agent of the FSLN. End Note.)

RIO SAN JUAN: DEMOGRAPHICS AND VOTING PROFILE

¶19. (U) Total Population (2005 est.): 95,546
 Total Urban Population: 23,050
 Total Rural Population: 72,496

 Votes Received by Party, 2004 Municipal Elections
 PLC: 11,571
 FSLN: 10,073
 APRE: 2,546
 CCN: 209
 PRN: 1,322
 PLI: 656
 Others: 310

COMMENT: OPPORTUNITY FOR ALN

¶20. (C) As we noticed in other departments, the ALN leaders in Rio San Juan seem to have more energy and conviction than the PLC representatives, who are clearly unhappy with Aleman using the "dedazo" (finger) to select many deputy candidates. Many independents, especially young people, also appear ready to vote for change. The ALN, however, seems to be slow to take advantage of this discontentment. The local structures of the Alliance members have only recently begun to cooperate, and the mysterious swapping of candidates makes the party seem more like the PLC than an open, democratic organization. The ALN will have to be more consistent in its leadership style to prove to the public that it is different from the PLC and worthy of support.

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